

Homer the psychologist

Robert Parker

At the start of book 16 of the *Iliad*, Achilles is approached by his dear friend Patroclus in tears. Before Patroclus can speak, Achilles addresses him with a simile:

Why then
are you crying like some poor little girl, Patroclus,
who runs after her mother and begs to be picked up and
carried,
and clings to her dress, and holds her back when she tries to
hurry,
and gazes tearfully into her face, until she is picked up?
You are like such a one, Patroclus, dropping these soft tears.
(all translations by Richmond Lattimore)

As so often, details are piled up in the simile not to introduce extra resemblances between it and the narrative – Achilles is not being held back by Patroclus from going anywhere, nor have we any reason to think that Patroclus was shorter than his friend – but in order to cause the central image to emerge with complete clarity and vividness: suddenly and very unexpectedly, the little girl tugging at her mother's dress stands before us. It is an extraordinarily warm and domestic touch to find in such a place. This is the kind of little girl one might expect to meet in a painting by one of the French impressionists, say, not in the poem which above all others is responsible for the tradition that epic poetry is poetry about battles and deeds of heroes.

Tears before bedtime

Critics have commented, perhaps not wrongly, that the simile shows that Achilles' feeling for Patroclus is like that of a parent for a child. But a more oblique and more important point is the implication that it carries for the ways in which Achilles and Patroclus could talk to one another. No comparison is less appropriate for an epic warrior than that to a weeping child: in different circumstances, it could have been a deadly insult, and bloodshed would have been the result. By comparing him to such an insignificant creature, Achilles is gently teasing Patroclus; the teasing continues in the rest of the speech, where he pretends not to know why Patroclus is so upset. But the only people whom one can tease in that way are those to whom one is very close. Achilles' intense, though non-sexual, love for Patroclus is the hinge on which the plot of the *Iliad* from book 16 onwards turns. And without a word of explicit comment Homer makes their intimacy unmistakable, by allowing Achilles to apply to Patroclus the unheroic comparison.

As Achilles knows very well, the real reason why Patroclus is crying is out of pity for his Greek comrades, who are suffering disastrous losses in battle through Achilles' refusal to fight. Achilles withdrew from battle in book 1 when the Greek leader Agamemnon deprived him of his battle-prize, the girl Briseis. In book 9 Agamemnon apologized, after a fashion, for the wrong he had done Achilles, and offered compensation on a huge scale. But the attempt to bandage the wound only re-opened it: Achilles' feelings about the insult put upon him come tumbling forth in a speech of 120 lines which is a masterpiece in the depiction of no longer repressed rage. The poet Alexander Pope in a note to his translation of the *Iliad* (published early in the eighteenth century) commented:

Nothing is more remarkable than the Conduct of Homer

in this speech of Achilles. He begins with some degree of coolness, as in respect to the Embassadors whose Persons he esteem'd, yet even there his temper just shews itself... He then falls into a sullen Declaration of his Resolves, and a more sedate representation of his past Services; but warms as he goes on, and every Minute he but names his Wrongs, flies out into Extravagance. His Rage awaken'd by that Injury, is like a Fire blown by a Wind, that sinks and rises by fits, but keeps continually burning, and blazes but the more for those Intermissions.

Anger if it lasts for a period of time is not always at its highest intensity, but goes on and off the boil. In one sense Achilles is displaying heroic rage, but in another what Homer gives us is a depiction of anger as we all know it.

Apocalypse now

What Patroclus wants, when he approaches Achilles in tears at the start of book 16, is to persuade him to return to battle, or, if he will not, to permit Patroclus to go in his place. He accuses Achilles of an inhuman lack of pity for his dying comrades; he also hints, woundingly, that he may be shunning battle because of an ominous prophecy. None of this is what Achilles wants to hear. His anger against Agamemnon, after the great outburst in book 9, is largely spent. He is not, we may imagine, indifferent to the sufferings of the Greeks who have been his comrades for ten years. And it is certainly not through cowardice or fear of an ominous prophecy that he is keeping out of the battle-lines. Doubtless he would be very glad to get among the Trojans with his sword again. But he is a prisoner of the position he adopted in book 9, that he would not return to the fight until fire reached his own ships. And so he goes over all the old ground again, re-emphasizing the insult that Agamemnon inflicted on him and ignoring Agamemnon's attempt in book 9 to make it good. The one concession that he makes, disastrously, is to allow Patroclus to return to battle in his place. His answer to Patroclus ends with a remarkable outburst:

*Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, if only
not one of all the Trojans could escape destruction, not one
of the Argives, but you and I could emerge from the slaughter
so that we two alone could break Troy's hallowed coronal.*

This is not a very rational wish. Would Achilles and Patroclus really have been happy as the sole survivors once this nuclear winter had descended upon the plains of Troy? I read this mad, horrendous and haunting prayer as a product of the situation in which Achilles finds himself: all his impulses now are to fight the Trojans, but he is debarred from doing so by what he sees as an outrageous wrong done him by the leader of the Greeks. In extreme frustration, he wishes total destruction on both camps.

Silence is golden

These incidents illustrate Homer's way with questions of psychology, character and human interaction. Everything is achieved by what the characters are made to do, or say, almost nothing by explicit comment of the poet himself. The approach of later writers has often been very different. Take this description, for instance, of the heroine of what many regard as the greatest English novel, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*:

Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world. . . she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing what-ever seemed to her to have these aspects; likely to seek martyrdom.

With the change of she to he, that could come, in fact, surprisingly close to a description of some aspects of Achilles. But such direct statement by the author of what the character is like or what he or she is thinking at a particular moment is completely foreign to Homer's manner. As Aristotle said approvingly, 'Homer is the only poet who understands the proper way to compose. For the poet ought to say as little as possible in his own person.'

It does not follow that there is anything primitive or deficient about Homer's presentation of character and feeling. The ribbing tone Achilles adopts to Patroclus in 16, the ebb and flow of his anger in 9, the wild unreality of his wish that none should survive but Patroclus and himself: these are delicate and subtle effects, and the text is full of them. If a character's motives or attitudes seem confused, they probably are; and it is Homer's art to have shown them as being so. A final example might be the scene in book 6 where Hector is talking to his wife Andromache at the gates of Troy. Andromache is urging him to stay inside the walls and not risk a direct encounter with the Greeks. She stresses her absolute dependence on him alone, all her other kin being dead:

*Hector, thus you are father to me, and my honoured mother,
you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband
Hector in turn emphasizes her love and pity for her:
For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it:
there will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish,
and Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong ash spear.
But it is not so much the pain to come of the Trojans
that troubles me, not even of Priam the king nor Hekabe,
not the thought of my brothers who in their numbers and
valour
shall drop in the dust under the hands of men who hate them,
as troubles me the thought of you, when some bronze-
armoured
Achaian leads you off, taking away your day of liberty,
in tears; and in Argos you must work at the loom of another. .
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There follows the famous moment when Hector reaches out for his little son Astyanax, but the boy, terrified by the gleam of Hector's armour, shrinks back screaming in his nurse's arms. Hector laughs, removes the offending helmet, takes his son in his arms, and prays:

*Zeus and you other immortals, grant that this boy, who is my
son,
may be as I am, pre-eminent among the Trojans,
great in strength, as am I, and rule strongly over Ilion;
and some day let them say of him: 'He is better by far than his
father',
as he comes in from the fighting; and let him kill his enemy
and bring home the blooded spoils, and delight the heart of his
mother.*

The warmth and intimacy of this family-scene has always charmed readers; it has a tenderness that almost no other poet except Shakespeare has achieved. But on a cold view Hector appears rather confused. The city, he says, will certainly fall and his family be ruined; but he goes on to utter an optimistic prayer for Astyanax's glorious future in an undamaged Troy. It is the contradiction which indicates to us Hector's state of mind. A ponderous modern writer might spell it out as follows: 'As Hector felt his dear son in his arms, the black mood left him and he began to hope again. Throughout this tenth year of the war he had been assailed by grim forebodings, a sense of the hopelessness of the struggle to defend Troy; during sleepless nights

he played over and over in his mind the vision of his own death and his dear wife's degradation; yet he never surrendered to complete despair, and like a man who knows that he is dying of an incurable disease and yet on occasion allows himself still to plan and hope, so too Hector on occasion indulged in wistful fantasies about the future that his better judgment condemned as impossible.' But enough of this turgid stuff composed by me! Homer conveys all that without, as Aristotle comments, saying a word in his own person.

Robert Parker is the Wykeham Professor of Ancient History at Oxford where he works on Greek history and religion. We reckon he has already edited nine issues of Omnibus, and he'll be editing it again next year.